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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/27/2016

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SUBJECT: BILATERAL MEETING BETWEEN GEORGIAN AND ABKHAZ

OFFICIALS HELPS COMMUNICATION

REF: TBILISI 3250

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark X. Perry, reason 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Georgian Deputy State Minister for Conflicts

Resolution Ruslan Abashidze returned December 21 from leading a GoG delegation at the Conciliation Resources-organized discussions in London with an Abkhaz delegation. He briefed Charge about the results of the meeting. The Georgian delegation included a representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Eka Zguladze, MFA officials, and members of the Abkhaz government-in-exile now based in the Kodori Gorge. The Abkhaz delegation included Gari Kupalba, de-facto deputy minister of defense, Daur Kove, de facto deputy minister of foreign affairs, Dmitri Shamba, economic advisor to de facto president Bagapsh, a representative of the Abkhaz political opposition and a member of the Armenian community in Abkhazia. The Abkhaz governor of the Gali region, Ruslan Kishmaria, was supposed to attend but cancelled because he had his hands full at home with the aftermath of the Chakaberia arrest (reftel).

¶2. (C) Abashidze characterized the discussions as constructive, honest and helpful. He said the Russian shadow was obvious and caused Abkhaz reticence, but with moments of illumination. According to Abashidze, the discussion included the following elements.

-- Kodori Gorge: The delegations spent most of two days discussing Kodori. The Abkhaz admitted that the August operation to seize Kodori was "well done" by the Georgians. However, the Kodori situation is still a hot issue in Abkhaz politics and the opposition is putting a lot of pressure on Bagapsh to do something about it. As the campaigns for the February/March Abkhazia parliamentary elections heat up, the pressure will intensify on the de-facto government to take stronger action against the Georgian presence Kodori, even to the extent of using military force. The Abkhaz are firmly against the Tbilisi-sponsored Abkhaz government-in-exile based in Kodori Gorge. Regarding monitoring visits to the Gorge, the Georgians proposed replacing the Russian PKF members with Abkhaz observers. The Abkhaz were not prepared to answer this proposal.

-- Return of Refugees: The Abkhaz representatives support the return of IDPs, but gradually. In contrast, the representative of the Armenian community spoke against the return of IDPs.

-- NATO: The Georgians proposed sending representatives of the Abkhaz de facto government on a study tour to Brussels to learn more about NATO, its objectives, and what Intensive Dialog is all about. The idea is to counter Abkhaz misperceptions and help them see why moving toward NATO membership is a good policy. The Abkhaz were not prepared to

give a response.

-- Economic Rehabilitation: The Georgians proposed the same format for economic rehabilitation as is now being used in South Ossetia, with a joint plan and a donor steering committee. The Abkhaz agree that the focus should be on economic development, but were not prepared to discuss format.

-- Existing Negotiating Mechanisms: The Georgians explained why they would like to emphasize direct bilateral negotiations and international involvement in the solution to the conflict and providing guarantees. The Abkhaz understood, but said it is important to keep the Russians involved and protect Russian equities. In their view, internationalization is not possible at this stage.

¶3. (C) Comment: We believe direct meetings such as these, outside the formal UN framework, are useful to keep the dialog going and build trust. In this case, neither side seemed to be bent on scoring points either in the meeting or in the media, but rather building a means of direct communication about problems. Although no breakthroughs occurred, the Abkhaz side was able to speak with a bit more freedom than when Russian diplomats are present.

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